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A Handbook for

Chapter 188 Early Childhood Advisory Councils

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MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Bureau of Early Childhood Programs

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MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

The Department of Education's regional early childhood staff are available to provide technical assistance to local Early Childhood Advisory Councils. Department staff may attend Council meetings, provide information about Board policies, guidelines, and standards, provide resources about local, state and national trends in early childhood programs, provide technical assistance to support Council activities and to support program development. Department early childhood staff members are listed on the last page of this handbook.

INTRODUCTION

As early childhood programs continue to be at the forefront of educational reform and the need for affordable high quality child care becomes a common concern, communities are mobilizing to respond to the needs of young children and their families.

In Massachusetts, local Early Childhood Advisory Councils have been formed as part of the Public School Improvement Act of 1985 to respond to these needs. These Advisory Councils serve as important vehicles for community involvement in the assessment of early childhood needs and resources and in program development and implementation.

In most school systems, a public school staff person is assigned to work with the local Early Childhood Advisory Council. It is critical to the success of the Council that the assignment of this staff person be ongoing and consistent in order to provide continuity to Council activities.

This handbook is to provide assistance in the development and operation of local Early Childhood Advisory Councils. It can serve as a catalyst for the creation of Councils or be used as a resource to strengthen existing Councils. The handbook is designed to be useful to a staff person who is assigned to work with a Council and to all members of local Early Childhood Advisory Councils.

I. DEVELOPING AN EARLY CHILDHOOD ADVISORY COUNCIL

MEMBERSHIP COMPOSITION

Under Chapter 188, local school committees applying for funds must appoint an Early Childhood Advisory Council. Since the strength of an Advisory Council lies in its membership, membership recruitment and selection necessitate careful and thoughtful consideration. Membership should reflect the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity of the community as well as a balanced representation of the public and private agencies that serve young children and their families. Recommended membership composition includes (members required by Chapter 188 are in italics):

- Preschool, kindergarten and primary grade *teachers*
- Elementary *principal*
- *Parents* of preschool-age children, including parents of young children with special needs
- *Member of the local Resource and Referral Agency*
- Representatives from such programs as Head Start, private and public day care, private preschools, family day care, special education, Early Intervention, and *others with experience in the care and education of young children*
- Representatives from the local business community

MEMBERSHIP ROLES

In order to meet the needs of the community, members should be able to form a primary allegiance to the Council in their roles as Council members, rather than as representatives of a specific program or community group. This will foster a sense of common purpose rather than that of a group that is advocating for individual programmatic needs.

Individual members should have the ability to work well with others. For example, they should have strong interpersonal skills, objectivity, good communication skills, and patience.

COUNCIL SIZE

Council size should range from ten to twenty people to ensure that internal Council functioning is not too cumbersome. It is advisable to start with fewer members and build the Council gradually, as the Council's work evolves.

MEMBERSHIP SELECTION/APPOINTMENT

The process by which members of a Council are selected varies from one community to the next. Often a combination of approaches is useful. Some school committees hold elections, others welcome any and all volunteers as Council members, while still others enlist a selection committee to recommend appointments.

An effective approach to assure that a Council includes broadly based representation of qualified people is appointment through a selection committee. A selection committee may be a small representative group of community and school members experienced in community affairs and/or early childhood programming.

The role of a selection committee is first to analyze the community to determine its composition. Consideration should be given to characteristics of the community and other criteria suggested in the "Membership Composition" section above. Once this analysis has been made, a selection committee begins identifying possible people to represent each of the community's groups or contacts organizations to recommend representatives.

When trying to interest potential members in joining the Early Childhood Advisory Council, the approach should:

- be personal
- be both verbal and written
- clearly explain responsibilities and time commitment
- identify those qualities of the candidate which are needed by the Council
- allow ample time for the potential member to respond to the invitation

Other recruitment approaches might include such activities as advertising in local newspapers or cable television stations, posting notices in public locations, or sending special mailings to potential members. Predetermined selection criteria may then be used by the selection committee to make final recommendations for Advisory Council membership appointments to the local school committee.

MEMBERSHIP ORIENTATION

The Council should plan to provide orientation on an ongoing basis to new members. Membership orientation could include such elements as review of Council mission statement and Bylaws, meeting schedule, and Council member responsibilities.

MEMBERSHIP TERMS

A term of two to three years is suggested. Such a length of term permits members sufficient time to become knowledgeable of Council practices, to increase group cohesiveness and to provide continuity in communications. A revolving two to three year rotation of a few members each year also allows for the continual expression of new ideas and approaches.

OPERATING BYLAWS

Bylaws

Local Early Childhood Advisory Councils are encouraged to develop Bylaws which inform Council members, school committee, and the community about the role, function, and procedures that govern the activities of the Council (e.g. procedures for appointment of chairpeople, membership recruitment procedures, decision making procedures, meeting policies, etc.)

The operating Bylaws should be documented and periodically reviewed. Many Councils find Robert's Rules of Order helpful in maintaining parliamentary procedures. Early Childhood Advisory Council meetings are public meetings, must be posted publicly and are required to follow open meeting laws.

Mission Statement

Council Bylaws should include a philosophy or mission statement which will help Council members understand their present tasks in the context of past achievements and future goals. A mission or philosophy statement defines the purpose of the Council, its authorization or charge, its position on early childhood programs, and its responsibilities. Such a statement provides ongoing direction for the Council in the development of a comprehensive plan for early childhood services in its community.

Since the Early Childhood Advisory Council advises the local school committee it should be sure that its mission statement is in concert with the mission the school committee has in mind. Also, Council Bylaws should be acceptable to the local school committee and administration.

II. RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD ADVISORY COUNCIL

SELECTING A CHAIRPERSON

Community involvement can be enhanced by electing a chairperson who is a community representative or by electing a public school employee and a community representative as co-chairpeople. This type of leadership can provide Council activities with a broad community perspective and a sense of shared responsibility. If co-chairpeople are selected, they should be certain to clearly delineate responsibilities and roles.

The Council should elect a chairperson(s) who has leadership ability and skills, such as:

- ability to make everyone in the group feel comfortable and equally important
- ability to motivate members to accomplish goals and objectives
- flexibility to new ideas and suggestions
- ability to delegate responsibilities
- personal and interpersonal communication skills (written and oral)
- negotiation skills
- ability to recognize and regard talent and foster new leadership

MEETINGS

Meetings should be scheduled on a regular basis as agreed upon by a majority of members. Scheduling meetings at schools, public libraries, local preschools, resource and referral agencies, or other facilities should be done to accommodate the majority.

One of the chairperson's most important functions is to run effective, focused meetings. Specific suggestions for making meetings successful include the following:

- ***Prepare ahead of time.*** This means everything from checking on the room, the refreshments and the agenda, to pre-thinking the task assignments and anticipating possible conflicts between members.
- ***Be ready to help the group break the required work into manageable tasks.*** Try to make certain that each member understands how his or her task fits into the larger picture. Be ready to explain why accomplishing each task will move the group toward its goal.
- ***Make sure the group establishes a realistic schedule.*** A schedule that does not allow enough time to accomplish the group's goals will discourage future activities. On the other hand, a successful experience will motivate group members to keep on working.
- ***Be sensitive to why people are there.*** It is important to recognize that people get involved for different reasons. Reasons for participating can vary from a sense of civic responsibility to an assignment by a supervisor, to a desire to accomplish a specific goal.
- ***Realize that individuals play different roles in meetings.*** Some common functions that members may serve at Council meetings include presentation of issues, observation, clarification, identification of pitfalls, and mediation. It is the chairperson's job to keep the meeting moving and to recognize and call upon members for their strengths.
- ***Keep track of the time and keep the meeting focused.*** Allow enough time to introduce the agenda, discuss the issues and summarize the results. Try to make sure that individual members do not monopolize the meeting or repeat points already discussed. One should be careful to keep to the agenda and prevent members from straying too far off the topics.

- **Encourage everyone to participate.** Try to create an atmosphere of mutual support and trust by reinforcing good suggestions or asking listeners for their opinions. In particular, work to ensure that representatives from both the public and private sectors feel involved and welcome. Try to build on individual members' ideas.
- **Try to end the meeting in an organized way that sets the stage for the next meeting.** Avoid leaving any loose ends. Make sure to summarize what happened, identify the next steps, go over any task assignments and set a time and place for the next meeting.

THE FIRST MEETING

At the first meeting, ample time should be provided for all members to begin to explore the overall purpose and role of the Council. If this period is too hurried, there is danger that the Council will set unrealistic goals for itself or that individuals may feel confused or alienated. Members need time to ask questions, express their own ideas about the Council, listen to each other and become acquainted. Basic background information related to the general purpose of the Council should be available for members to take home.

AGENDAS

Agendas should be sent to members in advance. Ordinarily, the chairperson(s) prepares the agenda. Members should be asked if they have items to include. Agendas should note if a vote is to be taken on a specific item.

MINUTES

Meeting minutes are very useful. Distribution of minutes to key school and community representatives helps publicize the Early Childhood Advisory Council's work. Moreover, a file of minutes forms a history of the group which should be made available to new members. Accurate minutes should be available to absentees and should be sent to members at the same time as they receive the agenda for upcoming meetings.

SUBCOMMITTEES

Subcommittees should evolve as needed to work on specific activities and should report back to the whole Council. Subcommittees can be ad hoc in order to complete a short-term project or ongoing in order to work on continuing projects. Usually they are made up of volunteers and one person is asked to chair the subcommittee.

VOTING AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Advisory Councils often have to make group decisions which require a vote. At times, a member may find that voting on a particular issue may appear as a conflict of interest. No member of an Advisory Council should cast a vote on any matter which would provide direct personal financial benefit to that member or otherwise give an appearance of a conflict of interest under state or local law. If Council members have questions about conflict of interest, they should consult the local school system's legal counsel or the State Ethics Commission.

If a final approved grant proposal does provide personal benefit to an Advisory Council member then that member should resign from the Council. That individual could then participate in Council activities as Council Bylaws allow.

Many Councils have program staff whose salaries are paid with grant funds (e.g. early childhood coordinator) who serve as resource people to Council activities. Although program staff may attend all meetings and participate in Council discussions, they should serve as ex officio members who do not vote on Council matters.

SIGNATURES ON PROPOSALS

An Advisory Council member's signature on a Chapter 188 Early Childhood grant proposal represents participation in the process of proposal development and general agreement with the intent of the proposal. No individual Advisory Council member has veto power over the approval of a Chapter 188 Early Childhood grant proposal.

If an individual has concerns about a proposal they should first consult with the chairperson of the Council to discuss the concerns and to determine if the concerns should be addressed by the whole Council at a meeting. If concerns remain, the

Department of Education's regional early childhood staff are available to provide technical assistance.

EXTERNAL POLICIES

External policies are needed on how to disseminate information about the Council's work. Publications, media presentations and training programs are important in making the public aware of Council activities. Collaboration among public schools, local early childhood programs, parents, resource and referral agencies and other community groups is critical to the Council's success.

III. COUNCIL ACTIVITIES

The Early Childhood Advisory Council's role is to advise and serve as a resource to the school system and school committee on matters related to the education and care of young children and their families. In this capacity, the Council may be involved in any combination of the following activities:

- administering a community-wide assessment of early childhood needs and resources
- determining priorities and defining objectives to address a community's early childhood needs
- identifying strategies for securing in-kind contributions and identifying additional community resources that will help support grant activities
- advocating for programs for young children by communicating appropriate information to legislative representatives and the community
- participating in program evaluation and making recommendations on necessary program changes
- establishing linkages to facilitate communication with all local education and community organizations

Many Councils have seen dramatic changes take place in their school systems due to Council activities. Council members must keep in mind, however, that lasting change takes time. What may seem like a small curriculum change to an Advisory Council member may seem like an enormous change for a classroom teacher.

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Early Childhood Advisory Councils periodically conduct a community-wide assessment of early childhood needs and resources which identifies the diverse needs of young children and families in the community and the resources that presently exist to meet those needs.

A needs assessment should address the following areas:

- ***Early childhood programs currently available in the community for young children and families*** (e.g. preschool programs, day care programs, Head Start, kindergartens—with pertinent enrollment/waiting list data, program affordability, and potential areas of collaboration such as staff development, shared resources, shared space)
- ***Existing community services and resources available for young children and their families*** (e.g. mental health centers, public health clinics, community centers)
- ***Pertinent community demographic data*** (e.g. number of children from birth to 6-years old by age group; bilingual and refugee population needs; low-income family needs; population changes)
- ***School district early childhood data*** (e.g. preschool and school-age staff development needs; curriculum appropriateness and coordination; family involvement; facility, equipment, and transportation needs; retention rates; available funding resources; class size; adult/child ratio)

PRIORITIZING NEEDS

Based on the results of community needs assessments, Advisory Councils recommend priorities and define appropriate objectives to meet the needs of young children and families.

Needed services could include but are not limited to:

- integrated preschool programs for 3 and 4 year old children with and without special needs
- extended day and day care programs
- services for young children from linguistic minority backgrounds
- language enrichment programs
- home based programs

- referrals to other related services
- parenting groups and parent resource centers
- additional staff and equipment to enhance existing programs
- training for early childhood teachers and parents

IDENTIFICATION OF RESOURCES

Advisory Councils identify the resources needed to implement objectives. Resources may be derived from local, state, federal, or private sources, and may be in the form of actual budget allocations or in-kind contributions of services or goods.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Advisory Councils play an important role in the annual evaluation of how well a program is meeting its established goals and objectives for children, families and staff and in identifying program areas needing improvement. The Chapter 188 Early Childhood Program Standards Checklist (available at the Department's regional centers) provides a format for programs to use in conducting a program self-assessment.

After the program evaluation has been conducted and summarized, recommendations for program change and improvement are developed by Advisory Councils in conjunction with program staff and administration.

ONGOING ACTIVITIES

An Early Childhood Advisory Council should be permanent and ongoing, rather than ad hoc or temporary. Councils can provide communities with an ongoing communication network, a channel for public opinion about early childhood issues, and a group to assist with special projects and studies. Active ongoing involvement of a local Early Childhood Advisory Council can strengthen services for all young children and families in the community.

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